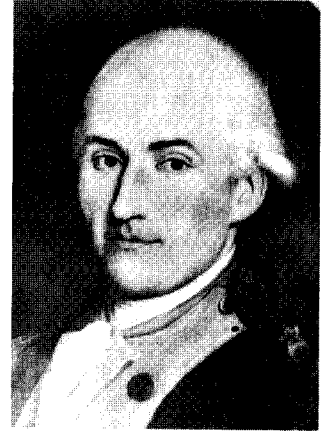


# **Prologue**

## **1775 -1866**

*General Louis LeBegue DuPortail*

—National Archives



## TO BUILD A NATION

General George Washington's appointment of a Chief Engineer for the Continental Army is generally regarded as the act which gave origin to the United States Army Corps of Engineers. Appointed on 16 June 1775, Colonel Richard Gridley was a logical choice. Firmly aligned to the American Cause, he was a mature officer of considerable military experience and probably the most gifted engineer then residing in the New World. As a military engineer he had planned the fortifications around Lake George, had supervised the construction of Fort William Henry. As Captain of Artillery in the British-Colonial Army, he took part in the expedition against Louisburg in 1745 and commanded the Provincial Artillery at Crown Point in 1755 and in the capture of Quebec.

Captain Gridley, British officer, had aided in fortifying the harbor of his home town, Boston, in 1746. Twenty-nine years later he was one of Boston's defenders against the guns of the British fleet. The day after his appointment as Chief Engineer, Colonel Gridley, American patriot, directed the erection of breastworks on Breed's Hill and furnished ordnance to his unmilitary codefenders in the first major battle of the War for Independence, an engagement known to history as the battle of Bunker Hill. Wounded in that famous fight, the 64 year old Gridley did not again take the field but continued as Engineer General of the Eastern Department until 1780.

Developing an effective engineering force from native materials must have been frustrating. A school of engineering in the American tradition would not exist for another 50 years;<sup>1</sup> in 1775 there were only a few frontier

surveyors, some practical men of yankee genius and a handful of trained Frenchmen. The latter were officers experienced in planning fortifications, who loaned their skills and their sympathies to the American Cause. With this motley and underequipped force the fledgling department of a threadbare army undertook to win a war. The urgency of the work to be done and the determination of the men who had to do it have come down to us in their motto, "Essayons" (We will try).

Ninety-one years elapsed before "Philadelphia District" became an official designation. Projects undertaken in the intervening period established precedents which provided the framework for subsequent area operations. At the beginning the military mission was paramount—and defense of the new seat of government had first priority. The Delaware River and Estuary were to be guarded from the threats of the British Navy by installing a warning system and building fortifications.

After the treaty of Paris recognized American Independence in 1783 the Continental Army Corps of Engineers<sup>2</sup> was dissolved. But in 1794 President Washington appointed another Frenchman<sup>3</sup> to command a new Corps, established by Congress and designated as the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers. A year later, the training of young officers and men in the art of military engineering began at West Point, N.Y., succeeding the first rough Engineer School established 17 years before at Valley Forge in 1777. The organization was to be short-lived. It had been created primarily to strengthen and extend east coast and Canadian border fortifications and to offset the possible spread of the French

